

DOWN HOME SERIES

Again in the year 2005, we're making our way around the region, each issue visiting a small town and meeting some of the folks who make up the heart of electric co-op country. On this year's third stop, we'll be ...



AT A GLANCE ...

POPULATION: 480

LAND AREA: 1.60 square miles

INCORPORATED: 1898

FUN FACT: Belle Haven is one of only eight towns in Virginia that is split by a county boundary line and calls two counties home. Part of Belle Haven sits in Accomack County and the other part in Northampton.

DOWN HOME IN BELLE HAVEN

by Judy Nordstrom-Bono, Contributing Writer

Like most towns, Belle Haven's story begins alongside a main artery of travel. In this instance, an old stagecoach road on Virginia's Eastern Shore.

A 1929 University of Virginia Extension report states that the town was first settled in the early eighteenth century by a fellow named Bell. Bell not only built the first residence in town, but also a large outdoor oven in which he baked pies and cakes that he sold to travelers. They called the place Bell's Oven.

Later, steamboats began to transport passengers, potatoes and produce as well as merchandise back and forth from Baltimore to the Shore. Miles Wharf and Rue's Wharf, only a few miles from Belle Haven, became busy ports.

The Eastern Shore's railroad, with a station at Belle Haven, was built in 1884.

The stagecoach, steamboat and especially the railroad served Belle Haven well, since the town was a convenient stop-off point for both land and sea transportation. The town, incorporated in 1898, grew into a bustling center of commerce.

Churches, however, did not find Belle Haven fertile soil.

Kirk Mariner, in his book *Revival's Children*, which documents the Shore's religious history, writes that by the 1870s, the Baptists, Episcopalians, Methodists, and Universalists had all seen their attempts to establish and maintain a church there fail.

The Methodists had an especially tough go of it. Their preachers were "jeered at and insulted," writes Mariner. One preacher delivering a sermon in Belle Haven found himself in competition with a "heated card game" taking place at the tavern next door.

"The community went down in the Methodist annals of the time as perhaps the most ungodly place on the Shore," writes Mariner.

Today, two churches on Belle Haven Road, once the old stagecoach road, stand as a testament to divine perseverance.

The Belle Haven Presbyterian Church was formed in May of 1879. Belle Haven United Methodist Church came into being seven years later.

A Frank Lloyd Wright-style building, the late Dr. Wayne Mears' medical office was used as a Head Start facility for many years until it was recently sold. The building is currently being renovated and will house a beauty salon.



Belle Haven is divided by a county line that puts part of the town in Accomack County and the other part in Northampton County. A road sign, on Belle Haven Road, marks the spot.



Mayor Hal Floyd, his daughter Bethany and wife Cindy stand in front of their 1890s Victorian, which had been divided into two apartments before the Floyds purchased it. Hal's mother and father had lived briefly in one of the apartments when Hal was a baby.

By 1910, a bank had opened in Belle Haven and, two years later, one of the town's most impressive homes was built by **Dr. Sydney Kellam**.

Tom and Jan Noonan are only the second family to reside in Raven Hall, a 9,000-square-foot Georgian-style brick mansion.

"I visited this house when I was about 10 years old," says Tom Noonan, "when my grandparents boarded their dog here while they made a round-the-world trip around 1957."

When the house went on the market several years ago, Noonan decided to move his family into town after living many years in a waterfront home.

The beauty of the house, with its three-level staircase as well as its history, intrigued the Noonans.

The house was built by architect John Kevan Peebles. In 1904, Peebles was chosen not only to design and build the legislative wings of Virginia's Capitol building in Richmond, but also to renovate the original structure. Peebles' selection was high praise for his talents, as the Capitol building was designed by Thomas Jefferson.

By 1925, Belle Haven was celebrating its heyday.

According to William J. Rue's memoir, *Things I Remember*, Belle Haven boasted 34 businesses, including "five general stores, a furniture store, theatre, telephone exchange, two restaurants, two millinery shops, an automobile dealer, two morticians, and a coffin shop." There were also "three doctors, a dentist and two bootleggers."



The Belle Haven Presbyterian Church (left) was founded in 1879, and the Belle Haven United Methodist Church (above) followed seven years later. Methodist clergy were not well received in Belle Haven until the late 1800s when a church finally took root. In fact, some Methodists considered Belle Haven one of the most "ungodly" places on the Shore.



Bobby Pase, owner of the theatre, still uses the 1948 Brenkert projectors, which he converted to handle more modern films.

Even then, change was already in the air.

The automobile, the subsequent construction of Route 13 from 1923-31, and the Depression would begin the decline of many of the Shore's business districts. Over time, traffic was diverted out of towns by the highway and then, by sheer necessity, businesses followed.

While Belle Haven's population has remained fairly steady over the ensuing years, settling in at about 500, most all of the businesses listed by Rue no longer exist. The Idle Hour movie theatre is an exception.

The first Idle Hour Theatre opened its doors on July 20, 1920; a 350-seat building premiering silent movies accompanied by a pianist.

The price of the movie was typically 10 cents a person. Troublemakers, however, were sometimes charged more. "Wise



The current Idle Hour Theatre building was constructed around 1948, next door to the original 350-seat movie theatre.

(Smith) would look you over pretty carefully and you didn't fool him for long before the price went up to 25 cents," writes Rue about the theatre's owner.

When a new home for the theatre was constructed next door around 1948, not a frame was skipped. The old theatre closed its doors one day and the new Idle Hour was open for business the next, says 74-year-old **Bobby Pase**, who bought the theatre in 1964.

The Idle Hour was not so lucky in the late 1950s, when then-owner Burleigh



Pase's grandchildren, Rebecca and Zachary, now help run the theatre by manning the concession stand and helping to load films.

Mears was forced to close the theatre, a casualty of television.

Pase had worked for Mears as a young boy plastering up movie posters in local storefronts and he saw the theatre as a safe place for young people to congregate on the weekends.

His first night, Pase was showing *The Seventh Voyage of Sinbad* at 50 cents a ticket, when the electricity went out. "I had to give everyone free passes," Pase remembered.

Now, his daughter **Beth** and two grandchildren, **Rebecca** and **Zachary**, help Pase run the theatre on weekends. The original 1948 Brenkert projectors, which were updated to accommodate new films, are still used and cherry and vanilla Cokes are still served at the old Phoenix Soda Fountain.

Down and across the street sits the old bank building. The bank closed during the Depression in the 1930s and was res-



Raven Hall, now owned by Tom and Jan Noonan, was built and designed in 1912 by John Kevan Peebles, who also restored and renovated Virginia's Capitol building in Richmond.

urrected 20 years later as an insurance company by **Walter McCaleb**.

His son, **Phil**, now runs McCaleb-Metzler Insurance Inc. with his business partner **Grey Metzler**.

During a renovation in the 1950s, the old bank ledgers, which document over 20 years of monetary exchange in the town, were discovered over the vault.

An addition to the bank building in 1988 saw a conversion of the same vault into a bathroom with walls four bricks deep and reinforced with railroad ties.

"It's the place to be when a hurricane hits Belle Haven or an atomic bomb drops on Exmore," says Phil McCaleb.

In half a century, McCaleb has seen the town's economic vitality wane and its population slightly decline and then pick up as outsiders moved in.

"It's still small enough so you speak to everyone you know at the post office, but I'd say half the people in town are not from the Eastern Shore," says McCaleb.

In the 1980s, two of those "come heres," a retired actor named **Allen Derrick** and his wife **Dorothea**, formed an acting troupe called Eastern Shore's Own, or ESO. Needing a place to rehearse, the troupe asked the town of Belle Haven to rent them the long-idle and much-neglected three-story brick school.

According to Rue's memoir, the town had been holding public school since 1875 in just about "any place people could find to meet with a teacher."



"February 12, 1924 was a red-letter day in Belle Haven," writes Rue. "Immediately, the school became the center for most of the constructive forces in Belle Haven."

The town school was short-lived, however. Five years later, the Pungoteague district consolidated schools and the Belle Haven building became a district grammar school. When Belle Haven lost its town school, Rue believed the town lost its "rallying point" and its "togetherness." He wrote, "So much for progress. Too bad for Belle Haven."

The Town Council saw ESO as a great remedy for the vacant school and, in 1984, rented the building to them for a dollar a year. In 21 years, the rent has never been raised.

ESO became an incorporated arts center in 1986 and well-known local artists began offering a medley of classes ranging from pottery to painting to sculpture.

Ballet and dance were first offered in 1989 and, with state grants, the upstairs floor of the three-story school was renovated into a ballet studio. Under the direction of instructor **Dana Floyd**, ballet has become an ESO mainstay.

"It used to be dance carried the whole thing," says **Jane Berge**, who is now co-director of ESO with **Sara Stuart**. "Now with the combination of everything else, it has balanced out. Still, dance is the biggest offering we have."

This December, over 150 children danced in the center's 14th annual production of *The Nutcracker*.

Music instruction in piano and guitar is becoming more popular and a summer camp for children entitled "ESO Art (With a Little Bit of Science) Camp" is well attended.

By Town Constable **Herb Tom's** admission, ESO is one of the gems of Belle Haven and just another great reason to live there.

Hal Floyd, who is the town mayor and Tom's good friend, agrees.

With their two teenage daughters, Hal and his wife **Cindy** have lived in Belle Haven in a grand 1890s turreted Victorian

McCaleb-Metzler Insurance, co-owned by Phil McCaleb (left), is housed in what was once the town bank building.

IF YOU GO ...

To see Belle Haven's houses, churches and businesses, take Route 13 to the Exmore/Belle Haven stoplight. If you are driving south, turn right at the light onto Belle Haven Road. If north, turn left onto Belle Haven Road. Belle Haven Road will take you through the old business district and to King Street, Lee Street and Merry Cat Lane as well as Shield's Bridge Road, which will take you out to Rue's Wharf. There are also several small side streets that make for a leisurely drive about town. Driving through town is recommended as the town has few sidewalks.

Although there are no restaurants, shops or hotels in the town, neighboring towns such as Exmore can provide places to eat, shop and stay.

Some Exmore accommodations include the 52-room **Best Western Eastern Shore Inn**, **Martha's Inn** and **The Gladstone House Bed and Breakfast**. **The Bay View Bed and Breakfast** is a waterfront Colonial close to the town of Belle Haven. **The Ballard House Bed and Breakfast** is located in nearby Willis Wharf. See www.BedandBreakfast.com or www.InnVirginia.com for other options.

For gas or snacks, **Phillips of Belle Haven** is a small gas station/grocery on Belle Haven Road that can provide both.

Exmore has a wealth of antique stores and emporiums. A few gift shops are there as well and a new bakery, **The Yellow Duck**, serves home-baked goods and coffee.

The **Idle Hour Theatre**, also located on Belle Haven Road, shows movies most Friday, Saturday and Sunday nights. Call 757-442-9192 or check www.idlehourtheatre.com for showings and times.

ESO Arts Center on King Street has ongoing musical events, art exhibits, classes and other cultural offerings throughout the year. In the summer, they offer an arts camp for children. Every December, the dance department puts on a wonderful production of *The Nutcracker* at Nandua High School. For more information, call 757-442-3226. ■



Built in the 1920s, the old Belle Haven School is now Eastern Shore's Own, a thriving arts center with classes in ballet, painting, pottery, music and more. Co-director Jane Berge has watched ESO grow from an acting troupe to a full-blown community center.

home for almost a decade and a half. Both his daughters are talented dancers due to their training at ESO.

“This town is a good place for kids to grow up and people to live,” says 44-year-old Hal Floyd. “And we try to keep it that way.”

Belle Haven has never collected personal property taxes and doesn't plan to do so in the future. On Halloween, Floyd and Tom patrol the streets to keep the tricking to a minimum and the treating to a maximum. And community-wide clean-ups in the spring and the fall are neighborly affairs.

“We all have garage sales together,” says Cindy. “We all meet at the post office. People will call you when your dog gets out. Belle Haven's fun and it's safe.” ■



Herb Tom not only acts as Belle Haven's zoning administrator, he is also the town's constable, helping to "keep the peace."